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ABSTRACT

Magnet school programs require careful planning. Originally designed to achieve voluntary desegregation, magnet programs attract students of all races and backgrounds by offering special curricular themes and instructional approaches not offered in neighborhood schools. Outcomes of a successful program include the following: (1) desegregation; (2) decreased enrollment declines; (3) higher achievement levels; and (4) decrease in community concern over the general quality of education. The ten steps to developing a successful magnet program are the following: (1) decide what the program is supposed to do; (2) find out what the community wants; (3) decide on themes; (4) choose strong leaders; (5) let teachers volunteer; (6) provide staff development; (7) market the program to parents; (8) decide on selection criteria; (9) develop a practical transportation plan; and (10) identify and tap funding sources. (FMW)

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TEN STEPS TO A SUCCESSFUL MAGNET PROGRAM

RESEARCH IN BRIEF

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Research in Brief

Chester E. Finn, Jr., Assistant Secretary

William J. Bennett, Secretary

Ten Steps to a Successful Magnet Program

Magnet programs are proliferating rapidly in school districts across the Nation. Parents are fueling the phenomenon by clamoring to enroll their children in schools they believe offer the best public education available. Originally designed to achieve voluntary desegregation, magnets attract students of all races and backgrounds by offering special curricular themes and instructional approaches not found in traditional neighborhood schools. Admission criteria vary widely, with some schools having strict academic standards for entry, others using lotteries or first-come/first-admitted policies, and still others incorporating a desegregation formula. Magnets not only succeed in promoting desegregation, but they also help stem enrollment declines, raise achievement levels, and allay community doubts over the general quality of education.

Scholars and educators who prepared papers for the U.S. Department of Education's conference of magnet school directors agree that carefully wrought magnet programs produce these outcomes and some additional benefits as well. Magnets offer parents an opportunity for educational choice within the public school system. And magnet programs have been linked with reduced school violence and vandalism, improved pupil attendance, and more positive student attitudes toward school.

But the authors also note that districts contemplating magnet programs must plan carefully and work through many issues. These issues run the gamut from identifying goals and selecting viable themes to assessing community desires and developing an effective marketing strategy. Planners must also take care that schools do not inadvertently promote excellence at the expense of equity. They must avoid programs lacking community or parent appeal. And they must be sensitive to parent and teacher concerns about who will be selected to staff and attend individual schools.

The task of developing a successful magnet program may be challenging, but it is not impossible. Ten steps can lead to success:

1. Decide what the program is supposed to do. Be clear why the magnet program is being created and what problems it can alleviate. A district acting under a court-ordered desegregation plan may need to design an ambitious K-12 program with broad appeal. However, if the magnet is being developed to achieve other educational goals, different and perhaps less ambitious strategies may be employed. In any event, neglecting to match the program to its objective will invite failure. For example, a district seeking to remedy severe racial imbalance in 20 schools will not solve its problem by creating only one or two magnets. Nor will a district looking to promote widespread choice succeed if it creates programs targeted at only one segment of the student population—for example, the academically gifted.

2. Find out what the community wants. No matter how good a magnet program may be, it will falter without parent and community backing. A properly conducted needs assessment is critical to building broad-based support, while simultaneously discovering the kinds of programs parents want for their children and where the programs might be located. The magnets that are created need to reflect parents' interests and priorities.

3. Decide on themes. In choosing themes, you are answering a number of other questions as well, since the selections will influence such factors as curricula, delivery strategies, teaching methods, and even grade levels at individual magnets. Major thematic decisions are usually based on parent/student interest. At the secondary level, program themes are often related to career options, while elementary school themes are more apt to be based on curricula, delivery strategies and philosophy, or student needs and characteristics. Make certain that the overall program and the chosen themes are compatible with the district's education goals and with local and State mandates.

4. Choose strong leaders. Pick principals early in the planning process so they may be closely involved with staff selection. It is important that they have strong leadership qualities, participate actively in program design, and possess an entrepreneurial bent. This includes a willingness to reach out and tap community resources as well as an ability to attract students, motivate teachers, and ensure the program's survival over time.

5. Let teachers volunteer. When it comes to staffing, call for volunteers and then choose those teachers who are most committed to the program, have the knowledge and skills to implement it, and are willing to invest the added time that will probably be needed. When a program is started at an existing school and staff participation is voluntary, encourage teachers to stay on. If it is necessary to retain all teachers who want to stay, regardless of suitability, try to provide attractive transfer options for those uncommitted to the program. Select teachers early and give them a significant planning role.

6. Don't forget staff development. Preparing teachers and other school personnel to implement the program is important, since the quality of their training directly affects the magnet's success. Staff develop-

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ment efforts should be formulated carefully and should stress the new curricula, teaching methods, and materials. The optimum time to begin is in the summer months just before opening, but staff development should be an ongoing effort. In most districts, staff development for magnet personnel is a high priority.

7. Market the magnet program. Parents are the primary targets of publicity efforts and finding the best ways to reach them may depend on district size and demographics. For example, one survey of magnet school administrators revealed that most large districts (enrollments over 40,000) found mailing printed materials to students' homes particularly effective; smaller districts, meanwhile, cited newspaper ads as the best strategy. Meeting with parent groups, sending recruiters to homes, and distributing materials in nonmagnet schools are also effective strategies. No matter which methods are selected, they must answer parents' questions clearly, directly, and, if possible, in the parents' native language.

8. Decide on selection criteria. Developing entry criteria for individual schools is a key policy decision. Schools set up for the gifted would base admission on academic performance, while those offering alternative teaching methods or other specialized curricula would use different criteria. Generally, selection may incorporate such specific factors as achieving racial balance or meeting certain academic standards, but other commonly used methods include lotteries, degree of interest in the program, and location of residence. Districts often use multiple criteria, in part to encourage students with diverse interests and varied ability levels to participate. This not only promotes equity, but it also keeps parents from viewing the program as unfair or exclusive.

9. Develop a practical transportation plan. While careful and strategic placement of magnets can minimize the need for students to commute long distances, an efficient transportation system is still essential. Develop a comprehensive plan and explain it clearly to parents. Discuss bus routes and schedules, procedures for receiving and dispatching students, and policies for notifying parents when a youngster becomes ill. If district-supplied transportation is not an option, devise alternative programs. Don't hesitate to use community resources, such as mass transit.

10. Identify and tap funding resources. While the costs of creating and maintaining magnets vary considerably from district to district, often you must be prepared to provide some extra dollars at the outset. Building modifications, new books, specialized equipment, and staff development are among the start-up costs to be faced. Budgeting should be naturally tied to planning, and all potential funding avenues should be identified and explored. Effective strategies include seeking business, industry, and foundation support and applying for financial assistance from Federal, State, and local governments. However, maximizing the use of existing resources is a key factor in reducing costs, as is borrowing from experience. Local development of new programs can raise costs significantly, while a replication approach can be very cost effective.

Using these guidelines and a creative approach to building a magnet program will do much to enhance the program's chances for success. Magnet programs have been developed primarily through the initiative and ideas of local school districts, each with distinctive problems and concerns. It is only by adapting these guidelines and other ideas from the community that local needs of students, parents, and the district can be effectively served.

This Research in Brief is based on a series of nine papers conceptualized by OERI's Office of Research and written by researchers and practitioners who presented them at the U.S. Department of Education's annual conference of magnet school directors in March 1987. To obtain copies of the papers, contact Paul Messier, OERI, 555 New Jersey Avenue NW, Room 619, Washington, DC 20208.

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Kathleen C. Price, Writer/Editor
Mitchell B. Pearlstein,
Director, Outreach
Information Services, OERI

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